

YAVUZ BAYDAR
Building on understanding

We meet every year, at every possible opportunity, even if only to deepen our links and update our information. We do it happily. We have passed the stage of reluctance.

Last weekend, we were at it again: A group of Turkish, Greek, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot journalists met in Athens to discuss the current problems, and how to solve them. Overcoming certain obstacles is the path to opening up our societies to each other. We have actually managed to take some steps not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Pavlos Tsimas, our learned colleague from Ta Nea, assessing the "now" of the press relations between Turkey and Greece, was reminding us of this in a rather optimistic tone. When there is a vacuum in the political management, as it was in both countries some 10 years ago, it was the press of both sides that dragged both countries to the brink of war. We know that hot feelings of nationalism still drive some colleagues into passion rather than good journalism based on accuracy, fairness, independence and accountability.

As Tsimas and Semih Idiz from the Turkish daily Milliyet pointed out, we have still some colleagues who are wrongly driven into the same direction when times get rough, but many of us have learned our lessons: When journalists know they have to respect their professional standards than their perceived loyalty to flags of this or that color, the future looks more rational and secure.

Almost the entire spectrum of our press was represented in the annual meeting, arranged mainly by two hard-working people: Juliette Dickstein, the bi-communal coordinator in Cyprus and Tom Miller, counselor of public affairs, both from the U.S. Embassy in Nicosia. And obviously, as might be expected, we had a wide range of views on matters.

The state of affairs are much better now between Greece and Turkey, while the latest developments regarding Cyprus mean that a certain level bitterness still left traces in discussions. The differences were felt clearly in each and every discussion. The use of language was much more "coolheaded" and journalistically "distanced" as the rhetoric was colored heavily as soon as our Cypriot colleagues initiated debates.

It is always that way in disputes, but also the "size" of the country defines the path journalists take. We tried to explain to our Cypriot colleagues that the world is not -- unfortunately for them, perhaps -- centered on the island, base of so many years of disquietude and suffering.

Their discourse also differed: Turkish Cypriots -- much more diverse and relatively more independent than their southern colleagues -- complained mainly over the neglect that Greek Cypriot journalist organizations show. They hoped that all the journalists -- wherever they came from -- would be allowed to pass the Green Line, to be able to collect information and do their work. They expected also more representation in Greek Cypriot Professional organizations.

Greek Cypriot discourse -- now that Cyprus is EU member -- has been heavily colored by political language, that resembled a lot of the official terminology. It was clear that the gap between both sides' journalists would take a lot of efforts, since they can not agree on neutral words that would encompass their "total" audiences and help reconciliation. We ended pessimistically there.

Next year we will continue in İstanbul, with the third meeting. Let us hope we will have a better understanding by then. One important decision of the meeting this time was the start of a common blog. A good idea, everyone thought. We will do what we can.

07.03.2007

Columnists